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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7635

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RUEHUJA/AMEMBASSY ABUJA 1260

RUEHTN/AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN 6629

RUEHDU/AMCONSUL DURBAN 0753

RUEHSA/AMCONSUL JOHANNESBURG 8973

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRETORIA 000451

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TAGS: KJUS PGOV KDEM SF

SUBJECT: COPE STRUGGLING WITH DIVISIONS, PESSIMISM

REF: CAPE TOWN 00033

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR RAYMOND L. BROWN. REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

Summary

11. (C) The Congress of the People (COPE) is struggling with divisions and pessimism throughout the organization, underscoring the difficulties the newly formed party faces as the national election approaches on April 22. Personal assistant to COPE President Mosiuoa Lekota, Tseliso Phomane, met with Poloff on March 5 in Pretoria. Phomane, who said he is exhausted after months of campaigning and traveling the country, said the party is rife with divisions between those who support Lekota and those who support the party's presidential candidate, Mvumelwano Dandala. He also noted that the party is projecting it will win roughly 50 seats in Parliament and will need to form coalitions after the election to ensure the African National Congress (ANC) has an active check in the legislature. End Summary.

Down, But Not Out

12. (C) Personal assistant to COPE President Mosiuoa Lekota, Tseliso Phomane, met with Poloff on March 5 in Pretoria. Phomane is as close to Lekota as anyone and has been an active contact for US diplomats since COPE was formed late last year. He expressed far less optimism about COPE's chances than at past meetings. Moreover, he looked worn down and admitted that he is "exhausted" and "tired of the infighting." He said there has been substantial internal fallout from the party's decision to appoint Dandala as its candidate. He noted, "I have spent weeks trying to convince people to stay with the movement." He elaborated that Lekota and his allies are not angry that former Methodist Bishop Dandala is now the face of the party. Rather, they are angry at how Dandala was selected. (Note: Press reports speculated that Mbhazima Shilowa drove the appointment of Dandala and that the selection took place while Lekota was out campaigning. Phomane confirmed that events unfolded as they had been described in the news. End Note.) Phomane said that everyone in COPE agreed that the party had to select someone who appealed to voters concerned about the morality of ANC President Jacob Zuma. However, he said that "selecting someone while the founder is out doing party work is unacceptable." He also said that he was not even sure

where Dandala came from, saying that "he was not even part of COPE." He confided that Lekota's ego is bruised even though he is putting on a good face. Despite the selection of Dandala, and perhaps to confuse voters even more, Phomane said that Lekota would be COPE's leader in Parliament and that Dandala would "just be another member" after the election.

¶3. (C) In past meetings, Phomane had exclaimed that COPE will win the national election by taking a majority of seats in Parliament. However, coming the day after the ANC won key by-elections in Eastern Cape, Phomane was far less optimistic about the party's chances. He said, "Look, we have a good list. The top 100 in our party are solid." Yet, now he does not see a scenario under which COPE wins more than 50 to 75 of the 470 seats in Parliament. (Note: The projection of roughly 50 seats would mean that COPE will perform roughly similar to how the Democratic Alliance performed in the 2004 election, where it won 50 seats and 12 percent of the national vote. End Note.) Phomane said that COPE would be working with the United Democratic Movement after the election on a possible coalition, but would be unlikely to work with Democratic Alliance leader Helen Zille. He said, "We have no idea what she is doing." He said that the party is focused on winning Eastern Cape and Limpopo, but may not perform as strongly in other provinces. He noted, "If we had money we could compete with anyone, but funding has not come fast enough." He said that the party would do everything to form coalitions to keep a check on the ANC.

¶4. (C) Phomane said that there may be a few surprises ahead of the election. He confessed that Lekota is actively courting former President Thabo Mbeki and "talks with him all the time." Phomane noted that he would not be surprised if

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former President Thabo Mbeki declared his support for COPE in early April to give the party a boost going into the polls. He also said he would not be surprised if President Kgalema Motlanthe supports COPE after the election. Phomane related, "He is going to go from being a national leader to a deputy and it is unclear if the ANC truly wants him around."

Comment

¶5. (C) Phomane's remarks make it clear that COPE is struggling to maintain momentum and unity. (Note: See Reftel for more information. End Note.) When talk about the formation of a splinter party began late last year, Post outlined five key elements for such a group to be successful. First, the group would need a charismatic leader. Second, the organization would need a core of organizers and administrators. Third, the group would need money to fund the salaries of organizers and administrators. Fourth, the organization would need an effective campaign issue that distinguishes the party from the ANC and existing opposition parties. Finally, a new party needs will and chutzpah to maintain its momentum through the election. The party has made progress on all of the elements in recent months, but seems most hindered right now by leadership, funding, and by the question of momentum. The appointment of Dandala created wounds between party supporters, undermining efforts to pick up support and project a consistent message. By creating wounds, it is hard for COPE to keep the momentum needed to supplant the ANC. Interestingly, Phomane's projections of COPE's success track with what the pundits and political analysts are predicting for the party.

LA LIME